



## **Strictly Sustainable: Palmstead Nurseries Soft Landscape Workshop 2015**

*Strictly Sustainable* proved to be a lively and stimulating topic at Palmstead Nurseries Soft Landscape Workshop in September this year. Divergent and passionate views were expressed by Landscape Architects, ecologists and garden designers who all called for sustainable horticultural development.

300 delegates from across the industry met at the Ashford International Hotel in Kent for Palmstead's popular annual event on Wednesday 16th September.

There was a warning from key-note speaker Mary Reynolds that "nature is being pushed to the edge of ecosystem collapse" and that "our gardens have become nature's last stand".

Nick Coslett, Marketing Manager at Palmstead Nurseries said of the event: "I think the delegates will take a lot away from today, all speakers promoted the drive towards localism, connectivity and community cohesion and there was a unified call to be more collaborative as an industry."

Speakers on the day included Ken Trew from Argent the developers working on the Kings Cross project where public realm is so important to tenants and residents, Brita von Schoenaich leading landscape architect, Noel Farrer the president of the Landscape Institute, Guy Barter and Dr Alistair Griffiths from the RHS, Tim O'Hare the country's foremost soil expert and green roof guru Dusty Gedge.

# Workshop Report: 2015

## *Nick Coslett: An introduction to **Strictly Sustainable***

Nick Coslett took to the stage to introduce the topic for the day by asking the audience; “What is a sustainable landscape?” Nick pointed to Derek Jarman’s garden at Prospect Cottage Dungeness as a landscape “of its place, with low input, low maintenance and as a close to a naturalistic landscape as possible.”

Nick Coslett quoted Mayor Boris Johnson’s call for Londoners to “spend less time outdoors to improve health” issued in March this year which advised of a level 7 alert - the highest this year - put out to 17 local authorities, mainly in central and west London. Nick Coslett said that it was a sad day when such a statement was made, and added “today, here we can make a difference by focusing on this topic.”

## *Noel Farrer - A new wave of optimism?*



Nick Coslett introduced Noel Farrer, President of the Landscape Institute to the assembled audience.

Noel started by saying: “I sense a new wave of optimism that things are changing and things are going to get better.” He then asked the audience if they thought things were “accelerating in the direction of the good” and roughly 10% agreed.

Noel continued: “Perhaps I shouldn’t be here because I’m not going to talk about plants and that’s why we are here. Plants are the answer, underlying absolutely everything we do. Let’s not dumb these fellas down (pointing to the plants), they’re still the only complex things that improve the situation - they genuinely catch pollutants in our cities. Everything else, every other measure, just makes things ‘less bad’.

“Instead though I want to talk about ‘localism’ - engaging citizens in politics and the decisions that affect them. Localism isn’t about you or me; it’s about ‘us’ in our place. Localism is a fundamental part of the sustainability debate. Governing a democracy is simply a matter of managing the tensions between the need of society and the rights of the individual. We need to think altruistically about the wider benefits of what we do not how it benefits us. Only 10% of us feel optimistic here in this room. The industrial revolution was a fantastic opportunity to assist/be philanthropic be optimistic, but as Monbiot said ‘human society has been pulled apart by materialism’.

“We know that there is a movement of the population towards towns and cities and that by 2050, 70% of world’s population will be residing in cities. We have already passed the 50% mark.

“This movement is a force for good; people have made a choice to move from one approach to another. This is progress and change happening in the modern world and we need to study it and move forward.

“If we look at the UK the population will grow from 65 million today to 70 million by 2050. The landscape profession has a key role to play in influencing and getting this changing environment right.

“*Landscape* is very complex and we have to be interested in all aspects of it including hill farming in Snowdonia; it’s part of the landscape that we have created over the last 1000 years and has an impact. If we ignore it, there is a problem”.

Noel then looked at how impacted soil and lack of trees on the hill farms of Snowdonia impacted water flow from the hills, creating flooding in towns along the Severn valley.

“So, we do need to look around and think of ideas that we might like to incorporate.” Noel then asked the audience whether they thought the concept of garden cities was part of the solution going forward. Roughly 50% of the audience said they thought it was a solution.

Noel said: “It’s an old idea that’s not going to help us very much beyond the idea that green is good. But we do need to think about what the solutions might be. Ask questions such as *What is the role of green belt and its role in London?* The solutions aren’t coherent and we don’t have strong ideas and our profession needs to step up and answer some of those key issues.”

Noel then compared Houston in Texas, a place that's believed to be the highest energy and carbon producing city in the world (a place without trees), with Barcelona; "conceptually a medieval city, and one of the most dynamic cities in the world. People in Barcelona are considered to be generally happier and richer than most people in Spain and the Catalonian area makes 80% of the GDP of the entire country."

Noel explained that as a medieval city the layout of the landscape worked particularly well for residents living there. A high percentage of the food sold there is sold in the market. He said: "they run human scale systems that have been used for best part of 1000 years. Barcelona is a new city but it's also an old city that's held on to things that work."

Turning to large scale modern projects, Noel pointed to the Olympic Park in Stratford as "one of the most complex and holistic projects" with a successful "longterm legacy" adding "landscape has a critical role in successful societies and communities". He said that during construction of the park 1 person died. Looking to Vancouver, 1 life was lost there in the completion of their Olympic project. Noel then shared the statistic that so far, in Qatar, 1200 people have lost their lives. He said :"<sup>4</sup> and a half people a day dying is a landscape problem and asked the audience: What can we do about it? What is our voice?"

Looking closer to home, Noel spoke about developments in Cumbria whose allocated sites are green field. He said: "they're not answering anything that we might talk about in relation to sustainability. The high streets are dying, the pubs are closing and you'd think you'd want to build a new market with 3 or 4 thousand people coming to this town so that they could support the high street but they're building on the edges of villages. We will look back on these decisions in 2050 and think we've made a big mistake and say 'we made a mess of that'.

"We have a view about these things and we must get it out there and must get it understood by others. We have to understand the context of what we do. When you're looking at your drawing board, look up and understand the role we play and the contribution we play. The vulnerability of what we have is profoundly obvious from space; how fragile we are."

## ***Ken Trew: Kings Cross - A study in sustainability***

Nick Coslett introduced Ken Trew, the second speaker of the day and a landscape architect who is leading Agent's public realm team on the Kings Cross project. Ken explained to the assembled audience that the Kings Cross project is a great study in sustainability in terms of compliance, tenant demand and company policy.

Ken posed the question: "Why do developers care about sustainability?" and went on to answer it from his own perspective: "The first reason we care is, we have to; the whole compliance package is in place with s106 and BREEAM, but the other reason is - we want to Argent thinks *sustainability* is important and we only deal with large scale projects of an inner-city nature.



"All of our tenants tell us they want sustainability; the people who rent our cafes, buy our flats, have our office space, tell us sustainability is something that they want.

"To reflect Noel's comments - I think it's getting better. The coalition government was committed to sustainable development; planning objectives, say we must build the right thing in the right place, and we have a social role in supporting strong, vibrant, healthy communities.

"There is a lot of talk about social and cultural well-being and its something we've found at Kings Cross - plants really can make peoples lives better.

"We have an environmental role - we have to look at water management and material and carbon. At Kings Cross we are spending £500m just on infrastructure and that's money the government expects the private sector to find.

"The economic, social and environmental - from a developers view, what joins the three together is *human wellbeing*, how do we make life interesting for people?

"Now we are in a situation where there is a kind of convergence and we are all trying to outdo each other at how great we are at sustainability, we're all employing garden designers and its leading in the right direction.

"At Kings Cross, the green parts are now being developed. We surveyed the people who use the space and had a 90% success rate - 10% said they wanted more green and we took notice, we listened.

## Kings Cross Project: If you build it they will come

“We took inspiration from Laurie Olin, from New York, Philadelphia and Washington. What was really important to us was to see how people used space not so much what it looked like. We went to Bryant Park in New York City and looked at seating, planting, community areas and areas for solitude. We liked the bistro chairs in Bryant Park so we bought 200 of these chairs. We put them out and thought; ‘there won’t be 200 in the morning’, but they’re still there and we’ve bought more and more each year. If you go to a public space you should be able to sit down, and not only be allowed to sit down because you’ve bought a coffee.

“The planting takes its inspiration from Piet Oudolf’s Serpentine Gallery and the High Line in New York. Why don’t we do more of this in public spaces? We are told it’s too expensive, but actually we maintain that you can find the money if it’s what you really want to do.

“People buy into the buildings on the site because of the garden space. They enjoy seeing the seasons expressed, just because they may be living in the city but it doesn’t have to look the same every day.”

Ken Trew explained that Argent like to use the same team; “We don’t do a lot of tendering our team are a part of the family and give us good advice. We know we need expert advice; another speaker here today Tim O’Hare is one of our advisors. We’ve also worked with Dan Pearson for the past four years.”

Sharing Kevin Cosner’s vision from the film ‘Field of Dreams’, Ken said: “***If we build it, they will come***” - and I think public realm is like that. We see lovely photos in magazines of developments but there’s no one in those photographs We know that at Kings Cross people come to the site and use it - they enjoy it. The water features at Granary Square are used in warm weather. We also work hard to organise events and social occasions to get people in to use the space. We are keen on activation and enlivenment - welcoming people in and asking people to use the spaces.

“Accessibility is critical: we built spaces that people could access; people came to look at the fountains and we allowed them to do whatever they wanted and we found that people started arriving with beach towels and picnics - whole families would arrive and spend all day there with the children.”

Ken Trew shared the development’s #skipgarden - an initiative run in conjunction with The Guardian to show children how to grow vegetables; to show they need soil and water. “The project has just grown and grown and we may need to find a permanent home for the skip garden.”

In terms of use of sustainable materials and plants, Ken explained: “there’s a bit of Chinese granite around but generally we make an effort to use materials from sustainable sources. We reuse water. Planting and biodiversity is very important - and we’ve been tremendously encouraged by Dan Pearson’s work and appreciate the skill he brings to planting design.

“What does all this mean for the future? Well, I am incredibly positive about the future; people want to see greenery, we want to have more of a ‘garden’ feel to the spaces; its good commercially and people will pay to live in these environments and have them properly managed.”

## ***Brita von Schoenaich: Big Trees***

Brita von Schoenaich, a London-based landscape architect, was welcomed to the stage by Nick Coslett to speak about big trees.

Brita said: “I had a great passion for perennials in the 90s but I’m now in the 2nd or 3rd half of my career and I’m more interested in things that last. I’m passionate about trees and the impossibility of finding spaces for trees in our work. I want nothing more than to find spaces for big trees.



Plane trees have been planted at Kings Cross Square designed by Stanton Williams, after much consultation to support the green infrastructure along the Euston Road and cool the new square in Summer

“When asked what do we have for the future? We have children and plants - and I think we need to plant more trees.”

Taking the audience back 350 years to the publication of John Evelyn’s book *The New Sylva*, Brita described Evelyn as a “true renaissance man” who lived in a really exciting time. A man who lived through the reign of five different kings, Evelyn managed with *The New Sylva* to engage Charles II in the topic of big trees. “He was able to show there was a threat of there not being enough big trees and this would impact the building of ships for the navy. He dedicated his book to Charles II - it was a clever way of going about things; you can’t go about it on your own. I’m in favour of Noel’s linking things and making connections; engaging people with political power, this is how we will find spaces for big trees.”

Brita spoke of the Victorians and said “in terms of tree planting we have a lot to thank the Victorians. They did a lot for us; they dug the underground, dug the sewers

and planted trees. Woodland cover is very important - more and more of us are living in the cities and suffering from air pollution. Sheffield University has been amazing and made us leap ahead with our thinking.

“In my own work I like to think about what the space will be like in 100 yrs. I think you have to be quite militant. We need a *Tree Tsar*.”

“The Mayor wants to plant trees, but what’s really important is not the number of trees but the type of trees. We should ask that 50% of the trees planted should have the stem circumference of Boris’s belly.”

“In an urban context we need someone with power who will say: ‘we are going to have trees here here and here and the developers will pay for that’. We are in London and even here we can’t achieve a simple thing like that.”

“It’s important to encourage public consultation. Localism - you can’t underestimate how much power you have as an individual.”

## ***Guy Barter: Box Blight***



Guy Barter from the RHS took to the stage and gave a very informative presentation on the topic of box blight.

Guy gave tips on how blight spreads via plant materials, tools and equipment, staff, hands and clothing. He looked at quarantine times, cultural control and less susceptible cultivars being developed overseas. Looking to researchers abroad in Belgium, Holland and the USA. Guy also pointed to Palmstead’s wide range of box plant alternatives available, in particular *Buxus microphylla* ‘Faulkner’ which is considered to be more resistant to the infection. Also on display is: *Ilex crenata* ‘Dark Green’ an alternative gaining increasing popularity though slightly slower to form the density that Buxus achieves.

He said: “cultural control is extremely important; we need to prune to facilitate air flow. So dense topiary shapes are likely to be more susceptible. Destroy infected plants, cutting back to ground level and starting again. Avoid overhead irrigation and avoid areas of low airflow.

Guy also looked at chemical controls being used to suppress the disease and some plant tonic treatments such as SB Plant Invigorator and Top Buxus Health Mix, both of which encourage a stronger healthier plant more tolerant of infection.

The future for the plant is unclear, Guy said: “We are unsure as to whether it will become unrewarding and may vanish from gardens or whether it will remain in our gardens and schemes but under different management regimes and perhaps with more frequent replanting.”

Nick added that a guidance note on buxus blight will be available from their web site.

## ***Tim O’Hare: How sustainable is the topsoil industry?***

Nick Coslett introduced Tim O’Hare as “the country’s leading soil consultant”, a man who has “worked on a phenomenal list of sites and projects and consults regularly on significant national and international schemes.”



Referring to Noel’s talk on brownfield and green field sites Tim said: “we’ve mentioned brown field sites today where there isn’t any top soil and clearly we have to find it from somewhere.”

He looked at what functions soils have in our industry and in the greater world. He said; “we are reliant on them to grow plants, but there are other issues when looking at protection and management including ecology and biodiversity. 1gram of soil has 10billion bacteria in it. Soil is a huge sink for fauna as well as flora and if you damage it and don’t look after it you loose that.

Furthermore if you damage the soil you lose the attenuation in soil and plants don’t have

water to grow from. Soil is a huge carbon sink so if you damage it you lose the element of carbon sequestration.”

Tim explained how he cut his teeth on green field developments: “There was a phase of targeting brown field sites, but there’s a huge amount of pressure to develop green field sites; I’ve seen good ones where they reuse soils and bad ones too. Green field sites have a huge resource of top soil; and are a huge valuable resource economically and environmentally and something that it has to be managed properly.

“My philosophy is: look after the resource. We expect the soil to perform perfectly from day 1- people want a nice green lawn, we want the soil to aerate properly, microbes and bugs to live in it properly, but unfortunately the reality is not so often this way.”

Tim explained that this wasn't a localised issue and that DEFRA's nationwide study showed that the construction industry were the worst users of soil. (*The DEFRA Code of Practise is included in the delegate memory stick*) He added: “housing developers don't care enough about the soil. There is a soil resource plan; how and where to stock pile and how to cultivate it and improve it. It's applicable to any scheme - it's a mentality and we want this document to be used by planners.”

Tim pointed to three types of topsoil:

1. natural topsoil - surplus from other greenfield developments
2. manufactured topsoil - from dedicated topsoil manufacture operations
3. skip waste soil - from the site demolition and aggregate recycling facilities.

He said that natural topsoil was the best and that it should be reused, managed properly and put back properly. He then looked at soil components and how they are mixed with green compost, biosolids (sewerage), spent mushroom compost or composted bark fines. Finally, he shocked the audience with the high PH levels of skip waste soil (up to 11 – while the ideal for calcareous grassland is 8.5 max 9). Skip waste soils have low organic matter, low fertility, low microbe and probably high salinity. He talked about soils with no life in it but plenty of pollutants, he said: “physical contaminants, glass, nails, chemical contaminants ‘heavy metals’ ‘hydrocarbons’ ‘asbestos’ can come up when we test these soils. These days 7 out of 10 have Benzo(a)pyrene (BaP) and for the end user this is a problem and for the site operatives too.” He then asked; “how many landscape operatives do a risk assessment? We do a lot of asbestos testing as routine and it's scary - it's definitely a problem.” He recommended having your soils tested to eliminate these risks.

Tim asked the audience to read “British Standard for Topsoil B3882 (2015)” a new version of which came out in April.

## ***Nick Coslett: Sustainable nurseries***

Nick Coslett took to the stage to speak about Palmstead's programme of sustainability and plans for the future.

With over 1 million plants a year grown on a speculative basis and in the hope of finding a buyer for the plants, Nick said that Palmstead are “Proud of what customers do with our plants, though we don't often see the results, so please send in your pictures please. We love working with designers like Nigel Dunnet (showed photograph of Nigel planting up the Barbican roof gardens with Palmstead plants in

April) and with Noel Kingsbury on the Bexhill coastal planting scheme. We are enjoying more longer term partnerships. We are pleased to be involved in a project with The Outdoor Room at Guy's Hospital, Quadron's work in Southwark at Burgess Park and we are involved in 9 Elms Lane and are also delighted to be appointed the lead grower for the Garden Bridge project."



Nick encourage all present to attend Palmstead's forthcoming open week 19th - 23rd October which provides the opportunity to view the nursery at work.

Nick detailed the environmental scheme underway at Palmstead where plastics are recyclable and recoverable. He also detailed the scheme where old pots are recovered and returned to the manufacturer. Pallets are repaired and recovered and more danish trollies are in use.

On the topic of composts and peat, he said: "we believe our composts are from sustainable sources, none come from UK lowland peat moors or rare habitats. We are increasing blending to have a peat reduced compost. 20-25% of our current composts are peat free. Soon we hope to have the Growing Media Task Force sustainability scores for our growing media, which we will publish and if need be adjust our compost mixes accordingly."

The nursery is self-sufficient with water. There are two reservoir's containing 55 million litres of water which is equal to 15 Olympic swimming pools. Nick said: "if we have no rain at all we have a 4 month supply at maximum usage. Rainfall is also harvested from roofs and 70% of our growing beds. We have efficient irrigation too."

On the topic of propagation and sourcing sustainable plants Nick said: "our propagation methods - grafts, cuttings and seed stock beds are known provenance and bio-secure. We do have to trade and we try to trade with partners who are good horticulturalists with good practises - we only trade for about 20% of what we sell."

Pests are kept under control in a sustainable way. 400 rabbits were caught on the nursery and a large fence built around the perimeter. Biological control methods are used whenever possible; for example, pheromone traps are used for known bugs such as the tortrix moth.

Nick detailed the investment in solar energy via the installation of solar panels which he says “will pay for themselves in 5 years and in the 6th year pay for the new roof that went on the shed to make it happen.” The introduction of solar energy has made a difference at Palmstead by reducing the mains power use.

Details were shared about Palmstead’s involvement in highlighting ‘horticulture’ as a sustainable career. Nick said: “we try to grow our own stable workforce and provide in-house training as well as student placements. We also run student workshops, a student version of today, and we are also very excited by Dr Alistair Griffiths (who is speaking today) and his work which brings together the different horticultural agencies and lobbies government on the industry’s behalf.”

### **Lunch:**

The 300 delegates enjoyed a lunch break and were able to network between the different sectors present: developers, contractors, landscape architects, nurserymen from Palmstead and garden designers.



On stage following the lunch break: Dr Alistair Griffiths, Mary Reynolds & Dusty Gedge

## **Dusty Gedge: Singing a song of sustainability not beating a single drum**

Dusty Gedge bounded onto the stage and regaled the audience with his drive over the last 17 years to try to deliver a green roof policy for London.

He said: “Between the years of 2000 and 2004 I was considered nuts for putting a green roof on a building but, I’m not considered nuts now. So I can say to you that whatever you get out of this conference today and whatever you do today - in ten years’ time everyone will be doing it”



Dusty explained how he’d gone from a punk to a president and is now able to express his passion on the roofs of London; “As the president of the European Federation of Green Roofs and Walls Association I can give to nature and put back what I observed on the beaches of Kent as a child.”

“When we talked about green roofs in London in 2004, I had a lot of research to share but there were objections; people saw a challenge or a problem and their natural reaction was to put a block to it - this is reactive behaviour to stop things happening if it feels out of a comfort zone.

“But green roofs are really simple: the basis of green roof is short grass prairie planting on 50 mm of sandy soil. It’s that simple. I’ve learnt a lot by watching and looking.”

On the broader topic of sustainability and designing landscapes Dusty said: “We should think about multifunctional landscapes and storing water in the landscape.”

Dusty shared the story a social housing estate in Hammersmith where all the amenity grassland had to be turned into wildflower rain gardens, He said: “it’s the first time it’s been done on a social housing site - people aren’t usually given landscapes in social housing, they’re just given grass. But with schemes like this we can climate proof the housing estate.”

He concluded by saying; **“if every single landscape you put in is multi-functional we are singing a song about sustainability.”**

## ***Dr Alistair Griffiths: Growing People for Horticulture & Landscape***



Dr Alistair Griffiths is the RHS Director of Science and Collections and has been involved in industry initiatives to help grow horticulture as a respected career.

He was welcomed to the stage by Nick Coslett and encouraged to speak about his experiences in the industry.

Dr Griffiths said: “Horticulture has been my life. In a resilient society we have to work together to make a difference and make a change. *Horticulture Matters* (an initiative by the RHS to close the skills gap) was sparked by the dismissal of horticulturalists by the Prime Minister David Cameron. Horticulture matters and I’m excited about where we are.”

Dr Griffiths spoke about the ornamental horticulture roundtable plan, an industry initiative where the whole industry joins together to have a conversation about why ornamental horticulture matters. “It’s not just the RHS, it’s the industry coming together to start to ask the questions; we are worth billions to the UK as an industry.

“The government focuses on the economy and we have to use that as a tool to celebrate horticulture; we are worth £10.4 billion, we have 300,000 employees across the world of horticulture. With the ‘Grow’ website we encourage horticulturists

to share knowledge and experience with students. We need to shout about it more so people can be aware of what a sustainable industry we are.”

Dr Griffiths spoke about his experiences as a teenager and how he got the ‘bug’ for horticulture, he said; “we need to get schools growing things, once kids get the bug they’re hooked.”

“We have a profession to be proud of. Horticulture and plants connect people from all walks of life. The word *horticulture* is now in the national curriculum and this is a breakthrough. We’d like to get horticulture into more of the key stages and to continue to look at the RHS apprenticeship scheme. We need to look at horticulture from level 1 all the way up to PhD’s and collaborate with Universities across the UK. The RHS currently support 10 PhD students and 1 fellowship. This in turn links into the government task force. We need to create good horticultural scientists, particularly in the ornamental world, and encourage ambassadors to engage a wider audience creating a spark to get people inspired.”

“The government said we were fragmented industry but we are building partnerships and doing good work together. Anyone here who has contact with MPs talk to them about the importance of horticulture and training/our industry as a whole and how it can make a difference. Linking businesses and schools can link understanding and inspire people into horticulture.”

## ***Mary Reynolds: The Wild Way***

Nick Coslett introduced Mary Reynolds as one of the “top designers people should know about and is included on lists alongside Capability Brown and Jenks. I’m delighted that Mary has made the trip from Ireland. She is going to show us ‘The Wild Way’ and how to be instinctively sustainable with our design and planting.”

Mary Reynolds has kindly shared the full text of her talk and it appears herewith:  
**Sustainability in the landscaping industry....**

That statement is what I would call an unfortunate oxymoron ladies and gentlemen. There is a very large elephant in the room today. Nobody is asking whether we are going about this all wrong. There is a new question that needs to become part of our vocabulary. We need to start asking ‘What does the land itself want to become?’ Because unless we are working in true harmony with nature in our gardens and parks, there can be no cry of sustainability in our industry.

The thing is, what does that even mean? And how is it achievable while still hanging on to an income of sorts as landscape industry professionals.



A sea change is needed in our industry. We have to think ahead and accept the inevitability of change. We have to collectively morph into a different creature in order to survive.

Change is always hard but nothing good comes easy.

The only true sustainable use of land involves creating permanent ecological systems, ones that include us humans. We are after all part of nature. Everything that we are, comes from the earth, and we return to it when we are done. It is pretty short and simple.

If we are brave enough to meet the elephant in the room, we can as an industry become part of the solution to the inevitable challenging times ahead. It is an exciting time with so many opportunities, if we only knew how to drive it forward in the right direction.

In order to create a landscaping industry that is actually sustainable and exists in harmony with nature's own needs and wants, first of all we have to pause, step back and re-examine our current relationship with the land.

If you are lucky enough to own a garden, and I imagine most people here today do, I want you to think for a moment, what do you see as your role in your garden? Traditionally it was lord and master of your land, controller of all there is, king of the castle that sort of thing. That relationship isn't sustainable. In fact, that's not even a relationship. That's what you would call a dictatorship.

Creating landscapes that are in harmony with nature is a concept based on the acknowledgement and understanding that nature is a conscious living entity, real and present, one that is willing to join you in the process of creation.

I have always had a different relationship with land. Ever since I can remember, I could always recognize what we designers now call the *genus loci* of a place, the spirit of the place. It went deeper than that for me however. I wasn't very good with people but I felt at home in nature, I found good company there. I grew up on a farm in southern Ireland. . The land was very different when I was young. The methods of farming were gentler then as industrial farming had not yet been completely embraced and the earth was still teeming with life.



I have a strong memory of an experience I had when I was around 6 or 7 years old. One fine afternoon in May, I went wandering from my parents' farm and made my way to a favoured little field some distance from the house. This particular field was thickly bordered and enclosed on all sides by spiky gorse bushes, thorny brambles, fuchsias, crab apples, blackthorn, and sweet-scented hawthorn trees.

While walking toward the centre of the field, I remember turning around to look behind me because I had the feeling I was being watched and saw that the gap through which I had entered had completely disappeared. It was as if the trees and shrubs had moved tightly together and the entryway had been swallowed up. There was no way out of the field anymore and I felt pretty frightened and confused.

At first I spent what seemed like a long time shouting for my mum and dad and searching for a way to get out. Eventually though, I became distracted by the sunshine, the happy chatter of the hedgerow birds and the familiar, intoxicating perfume of the hawthorn blossoms. The forest of grass beneath my feet was busy with creatures of all kinds, The trees and plants were bursting with life. I could feel their individual presence, each with its own unique personality. They all seemed animated and slightly exaggerated, as if they were vying for my attention.

Eventually, I forgot about being scared and I sat down in the grass to soak up the sun and the magic. There was a feeling of comfort around me that seemed playful, almost childlike, and very familiar.

Nothing else special happened that day as far as I can remember. Time passed and I became familiar with my ancestor's land and its inhabitants. Eventually a neighbouring farmer's daughter shouted a greeting to me from the other side of the hedge and the spell was broken. I looked around and noticed that the gap that offered me a way out had been restored so I left the field and wandered home.

I spent most of my years as a garden designer trying to recreate that atmosphere I had met that day. However, it turned out that there were three ingredients to that particular magic potion and up until recently I had only been working with two of them... the tool of intention and the design of the spaces.



Brigit's Garden : Photo Mary Reynolds

Nature is a living entity consisting of an interdependent collection of systems. Inside each system are specific components and patterns. The patterns of each component repeat themselves through each system all the way down to the subatomic level. Since every living organism is made up of precise, repetitive numerical patterns it makes sense that we should try to follow the same patterns in our garden designs. This allows us and our gardens to become linked with the universal flow of energy. I wanted to design gardens that simply didn't block that flow of energy, spaces that naturally connected into the natural flow of things.

After much research into ancient Irish practices with the land, I learned how to activate the energy of nature in a place using harmonious design based on nature's patterns and also using the tool of intention.

However, it is only recently that I finally understood that what I have been chasing all along was actually a familial bond with the land I belong to. What I met in the field that day when I was young, was love. The love of a family, curiosity and a longing for the land and the plants to spend time with me. The land was a forgotten member of my family.... but it hadn't forgotten me.

About five years ago I made a decision to write a book about my work. I knew there was a movie being made about a period of time in my life. This film, a romantic drama called 'Dare to be Wild' is coming out next spring .... A film about my younger self shamelessly chasing a very handsome boy to Ethiopia and back while simultaneously building a wild garden at the Chelsea flower show. I used this pending opportunity to write a book about my designs.



However, I hit a slight problem. I wrote myself out of a job. As I wrote about my work I realised there was a huge elephant looking over my shoulder and that the way I was working with land was all wrong. I understood that despite my efforts to the contrary, I was failing to work in harmony with nature in my garden designs.

I had missed the most important part of the puzzle to recreating that atmosphere in the field from my youth. Although my gardens were beautiful spaces that allowed energy to flow freely through them, the land did not want to remain as I had designed it. I had to continue controlling these spaces, to stop things that wanted to grow from growing. Nature had its own intentions and I kept punishing the land when its true nature tried to emerge. The gardens had their own ideas on design and I had to learn what that was.

All garden maintenance involves fighting against the intentions nature has for herself. I had to understand how to work with this energy rather than against it.

Eventually, four years later, I figured it all out,... the secret of life \_ this puzzle I was faced with, .....and I wrote myself back into a job.

These days I look at land in a different way. I think we need to stop treating land like a blank canvas for our creative experimentation and enjoyment. Instead I have come to understand that if you are lucky enough to have a piece of land you call your own then you have become its guardian. You are like the parent guiding the land to grow into a mature, independent and healthy adult.

Maturity is reached when nature is allowed to move through all of the various stages of succession until it has settled into a balanced ecosystem.

Mostly all of the land we work with as farmers or gardeners, would naturally revert to being woodland if we left it alone for long enough. That's what it struggles to be when it grows up. Woodland. Cleared land on the other hand is like a child. Children, in large part, develop their self-image through their interactions with their parents. If land is cleared and worked, it becomes dependent on the direction given to it by the people that live or work there. Like a child it needs love, nourishment and attention to grow strong, healthy, and independent. In the same way, if land receives the message that it is only valued as long as it behaves, looks pretty and neat and puts on a good face when the neighbours visit, it will try and be what you ask as like any child, it longs to be loved. It will try as hard as it can to contort itself to wear those ill-fitting garments you may insist upon as the standard for beauty. But I guarantee you, it will not want to stay clothed in an enforced planting scheme of colourful annuals, or any of our current fashionable planting ideas. It will inevitably

burst out of the seams you have imposed, and its true character will emerge.

It's just plain silly to work against the intention the land has for itself and its certainly not sustainable. Most of our gardening energy is spent trying to stop our gardens from becoming what they want to become. We call it "maintenance," and a "low-maintenance" garden is one that brutally smothers the life out of the land. If we work to facilitate the land's needs, managing it just enough to allow our own expression and requirements to be part of the process, we are working within the flow of life. We are working sustainably.

Land can bond with the people who work with it, but that doesn't mean it always does. The special relationship between you and your land is the same as the bond that develops between a parent and a child. The parent can choose to love, cherish, and support the child, or treat the child harshly and without respect. The quality of their bond will be forever shaped by the quality of love, care, and attention the parent puts into it and the health of the child will reflect that.

The benefits to us guardians of this familial relationship with a piece of the earth is something we have somehow forgotten. It was a bond that nourished and supported us for millennia. It is a huge gift that enriches your life and fills back in those giant rips in our hearts that developed when we lost our relationship with the land.

These days, We only seem to appreciate wild places, we accept them for who they truly are. Places that have no bond with us at all. These are what I call lost opportunities. Your land is like a member of your own family. It can form a bond with you but it won't unless you develop the relationship slowly and steadily. Together. This bond is the magic I met in that field when I was small.

If you leave it alone, the land would eventually find its way back to maturity, but you can aid the process and by supporting, facilitating, and encouraging that "child" to become what it wants to become, a strong bond between the two of you will naturally emerge ... and this is where the magic lies.

When I was writing this book, I came to the conclusion that the most permanent sustainable ecosystem I should aim at, and what most of our land wants to become, was a multi-layered woodland system. Forests have evolved over millions of years to become the most efficient and balanced growing system possible.

There was however one seemingly opposing requirement of this magic potion I was chasing, that had me stuck and confused. In order for us to embrace the inevitable changes we must make in society to live sustainably and ensure that all of our current resources are available to our children and grandchildren, we have to become a locally based economy. We have to contract... you won't find many economists preaching the art of contraction mind you. We have to take our power back.

The most powerful way to ensure that we are protecting our resources is by growing our own food or at least as much of it as possible. Anyone with any kind of awareness of industrial farming and commercial horticulture and the effects they are

having on our health, the health of the earth and its other inhabitants will know that the system is completely screwed and galloping extremely quickly towards the edge of a cliff.

People gradually stopped growing food themselves over the last hundred years. Vegetable gardens were replaced with lawns, which gradually became symbols of status. It was a way of saying to your neighbours, "Hey Look at how wealthy we are. We don't even have to use our land to grow our own food"

People have become way too separated from the production of their food and have come to depend on processed food and food produced on industrial farms. Yes it's convenient. But in my book, convenience is the root of all evil. Nothing good comes easy.

Our food is filled with hormones, agricultural chemicals, genetically modified organisms, and various concoctions that were created in a laboratory. It is not real food but "food-like" substances. Our current system of food production is poisoning us, its poisoning the land, the water, the air and all the other creatures that we share this big ball of earth with. Even the organic system, although much better, is still not working sustainably with nature.

At first, combining ecosystem design with the idea that we needed to grow our own food presented an enigma for me because the two types of gardens traditionally required two separate areas. It just never felt right to mix them. Then I had my personal "eureka" moment. I came across a simple template that encompassed both of these qualities. It involved developing natural woodlands that also produced an abundance of food in a diverse, chemical-free environment.

Forest gardening is a method of producing food by replicating a woodland system. You are not exactly gardening in a natural forest; instead you are developing a multi-tiered woodland of your own making. Initially it sounded unrealistic to me, too, especially for someone who has a small yard, but after I looked into it and did some research, I realised it was a simple, gentle, and productive system of pure genius for gardens large and small.



Camel quarry house Cornwall - credit Emma Abdy Collins

Forest gardening is not a new idea; It is simply a new name to describe what ancient cultures practiced for thousands of years in various parts of the world.

The final outcome will be a lush mixture of trees, shrubs, perennials, vines, and groundcover plants. A mixture of native and non-native plants which will coexist in a mutually supportive community. With our guidance and support, we can develop stable and abundant systems faster than they would have occurred otherwise. In fact it's necessary to fast track the process as we are running out of time. Nature, has been pushed to the edge of ecosystem collapse. We have to step up, grow up and become the carers. Our Mother Earth is bled dry and has nothing left to give.

It takes work and careful initial design to install a forest garden system and shepherd it until it is mature enough to manage on its own, but no more than a conventional garden. And, unlike the conventional garden, there is light at the end of the forest garden maintenance tunnel.

The thick vegetation smothers weeds, renews the soil, and keeps it vibrant through self-mulching and perhaps a little mulching help from its guardian until it's up and running. Mulching is in fact the key to the health of the whole system. You should never have bare exposed soil in a garden. You NEVER till the soil. This destroys the microlife in the soil and is akin to ripping the skin off your body... the earth puts huge energy into scabbing over the cut, activating the weed seed bank which acts like her deep healing plasters. This natural healing process, deeply misunderstood by our culture has become a major source of profit for large multinationals, pushing their killer herbicides to keep everything neat. Never mind the fact that we are all

being killed slowly by these toxins.

Don't get me started.

This forest garden system ends the need for chemical control or fertilisers with no need to till the soil, or provide irrigation of any kind, if you install regular swales along the contour lines of your land.

There are so many opportunities out there for change in this industry, so many ways our collective energy can become the driver of positive change. Our gardens have become nature's last stand, tiny green sanctuaries, but right now, they are pretty poor sanctuaries.

We can become the guardians of our land, nature's champions, her green fingered army. We can develop an interconnected web of sustainable diverse and permanent ecosystems within through and around our homes towns and cities....ecosystems that will offer to sustain and nourish us along with all of other the other creatures that share the land with us.

We can surround ourselves with abundance and beauty and walk through our gardens with pride and love, knowing that in healing even one small patch of this planet we call home, we have healed our own hearts in a symbiotic process that has quietly reminded us who we truly are.

We need a green-fingered revolution to bring nature back into the gardens and parks beginning with encouraging people to embrace the land they live with as part of their own families.

Gardens belong to nature. Not the other way around.

And So do we.

## ***Strictly Sustainable: In Conclusion***

Nick Coslett thanked Mary Reynolds and all of the speakers at the event, he said: "I think the delegates will take a lot away from today, all speakers promoted the drive towards localism, connectivity and community cohesion and there was a unified call to be more collaborative as an industry. We must all continue and accelerate our individual contributions - every little helps and does make a difference. The passion of the speakers was fantastic and a real stimulus for the delegates. Probably most thought provoking, was the message Mary Reynolds gave that we are closer to the edge than we thought. This ought to push us forward faster as landscape professionals. We can make a difference to our environment, but we need to tell people we can. It's plants which are a major part of the solutions to the problems facing our society. Without doubt we have to consult more with government and also give our wonderful horticultural associations (Landscape Institute, BALI, RHS, HTA/APL) more information from the ground in order to strengthen and unify our collective voice."



From L-R Guy Barter, Ken Trew, Brita von Schoenaich, Nick Coslett, Tim O'Hare & Noel Farrer

Dusty Gedge reiterated Mary Reynold's warnings regarding nature's fragile ecosystem and said: *"Mary's talk is very pertinent; everyone wants everything instantly - we need to let clients know it's going to take 5 years to reach where it wants to be. We have an avaricious nature - we want everything tomorrow - but we need to ask what does the land want to be? and not what do I want it to be?"*

Bob Field the BALI National Chairman thanked Nick and Palmstead for putting on the event and asked delegates to join BALI or the other associations and "talk to us and then we can talk to government, we can then get our thoughts over correctly - you are not by yourselves."



***Date for your diary –  
Our 2016 Soft Landscape Workshop will be Wednesday 14<sup>th</sup> September***